

CALVARY

Monday, January 12, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Mark Olsen - LA Times *Rated R* *104 Mins.*

It takes a moment. As "Calvary" opens, a small-town Irish priest sits to hear a confession. A few beats have likely come and gone before a viewer realizes that the image isn't cutting away, that the audience is being asked to watch a man listen. It's unusual but also unexpectedly riveting.

Written and directed by John Michael McDonagh, "Calvary" reveals itself over and over to be a movie of such surprises, a serious-minded, lightly comedic rumination on life, death, faith and community. In its steady assemblage of details over an incidental, episodic structure it accrues a building sense of moral gravity.

That the priest is played by an actor with the natural, compelling presence of Brendan Gleeson certainly helps. That what the priest hears from an unseen victim of priestly sexual abuse is a threat to kill him in one week's time ups the ante as well, alongside the would-be villain's rationale that killing a good, innocent priest like Gleeson's Father James will pack more of a wallop than killing an abuser. The film deftly avoids becoming some kind of whodunit in reverse, as McDonagh shows little particular interest in who might actually be the would-be killer. Rather, the inevitability of what's coming gives a sense of clarity and purpose to everything the good father does in the time he has left.

McDonagh's previous film, "The Guard," which starred Gleeson alongside Don Cheadle, was something of a dark comedy, fish-out-of-water police procedural. There, variances in tone often came across as uncertainty, while in "Calvary" the story darts and dives with more assuredness, moving from serious to silly from scene to scene in what might be described as purposeful meandering.

The film is then not so much a meditation but a reverie, a swirl of emotions and ideas, managing to be both calmly reflective and skittishly anxious at the same time.



Often dressed in an anachronistic cassock and with a rather astonishing sweep of leonine hair, Gleeson cuts an imposing and authoritative figure, like something from a rough-edged spaghetti western dropped on the dramatic west coast of Ireland. The role provides a fantastic showcase for the actor, as he captures the inner conflict and outward placidity of the character. Written with him in mind, it is hard to imagine anyone else in the part.

McDonagh often pulls tension from the postcard imagery of the settings, such as when Father James and his daughter Fiona (Kelly Reilly), born before he joined the priesthood, have an intense, emotional conversation while walking along grand, picturesque cliffs. The film was shot by Larry Smith, cameraman on Stanley Kubrick's dreamlike "Eyes Wide Shut" and more recently the garish, hypnotic "Only God Forgives," and so the images have a dynamic quality to match the forceful storytelling.



The town has an assorted cast of characters — small-town eccentrics of various stripes — many of whom become possible suspects, played by actors including Aidan Gillen, Dylan Moran, Isaach De Bankolé, Orla O'Rourke and the seemingly immortal American character actor M. Emmet Walsh. Perhaps to keep viewers off-balance, McDonagh continues throwing in new characters fairly late in the story, such as Gleeson's real-life son Domhnall Gleeson in a single scene as an imprisoned serial killer. Chris O'Dowd, as the local butcher and cuckold, syncs well with McDonagh's sensibility, moving from funny ha-ha to funny odd to outright unnerving.

McDonagh is the older brother of playwright and filmmaker Martin McDonagh, writer-director of the dark thriller "In Bruges" and the inside-out killer comedy "Seven Psychopaths." The two seem to share a creative DNA in the intense self-awareness of their storytelling — Gleeson at one point expressly refers to a "third-act revelation" — but "Calvary" has a humane compassion that the films of Martin McDonagh keep more buried.

As the end credits roll, there is a series of images of the spaces from the film devoid of people — empty tables and open tableaux. It gives the life-or-death decisions of the movie a whole new framing, the world existing on after the travails of the story.

The film is then not so much a meditation but a reverie, a swirl of emotions and ideas, managing to be both calmly reflective and skittishly anxious at the same time. "Calvary" is a serious comedy, a funny drama, a ruminative film about life and a lively film about death. From the jolting simplicity of the opening scene right through those final shots, "Calvary" is never quite the film you expect it to be. It sneaks up on you.

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CITIZENFOUR

Monday, January 26, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A.O. Scott - NY Times *Rated R* *114 Mins.*

There are two ways to look at “Citizenfour,” Laura Poitras’s documentary about Edward J. Snowden, the former National Security Agency contractor whose revelations of widespread surveillance launched a hundred Op-Ed columns a year ago. The first and most obvious is as a piece of advocacy journalism, a goad to further argument about how security and transparency should be balanced in a democracy, about how governments abuse technology, about how official secrets are kept and exposed. The second is as a movie, an elegant and intelligent contribution to the flourishing genre of dystopian allegory.

Those who regard Mr. Snowden as an unambiguous hero, risking his freedom and comfort to expose abuses of power, will find much to agree with in Ms. Poitras’s presentation of his actions. This film is an authorized portrait, made at its subject’s invitation. In 2013, Mr. Snowden, using encrypted email under the alias “citizen four,” contacted Ms. Poitras and the journalist Glenn Greenwald, inviting them to meet him in Hong Kong, where he would share what he had learned about the N.S.A.’s capacity to intercept data from the phone calls, emails and web wanderings of American citizens. When asked why he had chosen her, Mr. Snowden, his identity still electronically shrouded, replied that she had selected herself, based on her previous work as a journalist and filmmaker, including a short documentary about William Binney, an N.S.A. whistle-blower who also appears in “Citizenfour.”

And “Citizenfour,” much of which consists of conversations between Mr. Snowden and Mr. Greenwald, emphasizes his bravery and his idealism, and the malignancy of the forces ranged against him. This is obviously a partial, partisan view, and several journalists on the national security and technology beats — among them Fred Kaplan at Slate and Michael Cohen (formerly of The Guardian) at The Daily Beast — have pointed out omissions and simplifications. Those criticisms, and George Packer’s long, respectful and skeptical profile of Ms. Poitras in a recent issue of The New Yorker, express the desire for a middle ground, a balance between the public right to know and the government’s need to collect intelligence in the fight against global terrorism.

Fair enough, I guess. Such balance may be a journalistic shibboleth; it is not necessarily a cinematic virtue. “The Fifth Estate,” last year’s nondocumentary attempt to tell the story of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, bogged down in the pursuit of sensible moderation, losing the chance to write history in lightning.

“Citizenfour,” happily, suffers no such fate. Cinema, even in the service of journalism, is always more than reporting, and focusing on what Ms. Poitras’s film is about risks ignoring what it is. It’s a tense and frightening thriller that blends the brisk globe-trotting of the “Bourne” movies with the spooky, atmospheric effects of a Japanese horror film. And it is also a primal political fable for the digital age, a real-time tableau of the confrontation between individual and state.

Mr. Snowden’s face is by now well known — it has been printed on demonstrators’ masks and stylized posters — but when he first encounters Ms. Poitras and her camera, he is anonymous and invisible, a nervous young man in a Hong Kong hotel room. He is shy, pale and serious, explaining his actions and motives in a mixture of technical jargon and lofty moral rhetoric. While he seems almost naïve about the machinery of celebrity that is about to catch him in its gears, he is adamant in his desire to take public responsibility for his actions, partly to protect others who might be

blamed. At the same time, he defers to Mr. Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill, a reporter for The Guardian, about when, how and how much of the information he is passing on will be shared with their readers.

Maybe some of this is ordinary-guy shtick, but it hardly matters. What makes Mr. Snowden fascinating — a great movie character, whatever you think of his cause — is the combination of diffidence, resolve and unpretentious intelligence that makes him so familiar. Slightly hipsterish, vaguely nerdy, with a trace of the coastal South in his voice (he was born in North Carolina and grew up mostly in Maryland), he is someone you might have seen at Starbucks or college or Bonnaroo. One of us, you might say.



But if he is us, then who is them? The officials from the Obama and George W. Bush administrations who have defended the N.S.A. in court, before Congress and on television, promising that the rule of law and the rights of citizens are being respected, even as the bad guys are being chased down and spied upon? Those presidents themselves, who preach liberty even as they expand the prerogatives of the executive branch? The telecommunications executives who collude in the collection of data?

All of the above, but maybe also not quite any of them. Plenty of movies have tried to imagine the contours of state power, but “Citizenfour” stands alone in evoking the modern state as an unseen, ubiquitous presence, an abstraction with enormous coercive resources at its disposal. To some extent, Ms. Poitras and Mr. Greenwald are engaged in a theoretical inquiry, a kind of speculative mapping, of the shape and reach of this mysterious entity. That is not to say that the United States government’s data collection program is not real, but rather that its extent and implications are only beginning to be understood.

Mr. Greenwald, a prolific writer and prodigious talker (in Portuguese, too!), has made his case against secrecy and surveillance in numerous articles, blog posts, books and television appearances. Ms. Poitras, who does not appear on camera in her film and speaks only when reading Mr. Snowden’s emails to her, pursues a slightly different project. She deploys the tools of her trade — spooky music and fluid editing, subtle camera movements and suggestive compositions — to try to coax a specter into view.

It is everywhere and nowhere, the leviathan whose belly is our native atmosphere. Mr. Snowden, unplugging the telephone in his room, hiding under a blanket when typing on his laptop, looking mildly panicked when a fire alarm is tested on his floor, can seem paranoid. He can also seem to be practicing a kind of avant-garde common sense. It’s hard to tell the difference, and thinking about the issues Ms. Poitras raises can induce a kind of epistemological vertigo. What do we know about what is known about us? Who knows it? Can we trust them? These questions are terrifying, and so is “Citizenfour.”

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FORCEMAJEURE

Monday, February 9, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Stephen Holden--NY Times Rated R 118 Mins.

Just under the surface of a seemingly blissful marriage run fissures that a sudden jolt can tear open to reveal a crumbling edifice. That's the unsettling reality explored with a merciless lens in the Swedish director Ruben Ostlund's fourth feature film, "Force Majeure." This brilliant, viciously amusing takedown of bourgeois complacency, gender stereotypes and assumptions and the illusion of security rubs your face in human frailty as relentlessly as any Michael Haneke movie.

The specimens under examination are Tomas (Johannes Bah Kuhnke) and Ebba (Lisa Loven Kongsli), an attractive Swedish couple on a family ski vacation in the French Alps. Both initially come across as so smug in their contentment that they appear unaware of any seams or cracks in their relationship. An early scene of them asleep in bed with their two beautiful children, Vera and Harry (the real-life siblings Clara and Vincent Wettergren), provokes a twinge of envy. In advertising language, they are "living the dream."

The upscale resort they visit, with its polished blond-wood interiors and breathtaking views, looks as picture-perfect as their marriage. Tomas and Ebba take it for granted that they are safe in this luxurious cocoon, despite the explosions that are regularly detonated on the mountain to manage the accumulated snow through controlled avalanches.

Observed in the eerie blue snow light, the resort's upkeep is a nonstop struggle to manage the environment at a very high altitude. Some might call the effort hubristic. And the scenes of skiers, blithely sweeping down the slopes while equipped to the teeth, suggest the same hubris. Besides the explosions, the soundtrack is punctuated by ominous squeaks, groans and creaking noises that convey the strain of all the mountain machinery.

The jolt that shatters the couple's serenity comes on Day 2 of their five-day vacation, when an avalanche rolls toward the outdoor cafe where the family is eating lunch. As it draws closer, panic takes hold. Without thinking, Tomas grabs his gloves and iPhone and flees, leaving his wife and children to fend for themselves. In minutes, the danger is over, and everything returns to normal. No one was hurt. What had loomed as a catastrophe was just a side effect of a controlled avalanche that stopped well short of the cafe.

But within the family, everything has changed. Ebba is chilly and remote, and the children upset and fearful. Tomas acts a little sheepish but pretends that nothing is seriously wrong. Later, when they meet with friends, Ebba pointedly brings up what happened and tells her side of the story, implying that Tomas's spontaneous instinct for self-preservation, without regard for his family, was unforgivable. When he refuses to engage her and explain his side of the story, Ebba can no longer contain her fury and contempt.

Earlier in the movie, we have witnessed her conversation with another guest at the resort, who shocks Ebba with her blasé description of her own open marriage. Ebba is horrified, and we see how her innate fearfulness has spread like a fever to her supersensitive children, who, at the first sign of tension between their parents, cry and fret over the thought of divorce.

Tomas and Ebba's escalating conflict spills over to another couple, Mats and Fanni, a divorced parent and his 20-year-old girlfriend. As Mats sympathizes with Tomas's instinctive fearfulness, the discussion becomes a battle of the sexes, in which the men defend their honor and manliness with explanations that, however reasonable, don't satisfy their partners. The surest sign that the men feel guilty and ashamed of their behavior is that neither can sleep. The knowledge that in some fundamental way they've been found out gnaws at the men. In examining machismo, the movie touches on themes found in Ernest Hemingway's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber."

In the most excruciating scene, Tomas breaks down uncontrollably in front of the children, while the disgusted Ebba tries to soothe them. Tomas is all the creepier, because even when sobbing hysterically, his display of emotion seems a half-faked, groveling play for pity.

From this point, "Force Majeure" doesn't know quite where to go. Although there are more little dramas to come, and Tomas tries to redeem himself, something is irreparably broken. What is painfully clear is that fear and denial are the emotional modus operandi of both parents.

What makes "Force Majeure" much more than a clinically accurate depiction of a middle-class marriage in crisis is its keen understanding of how, in modern civilization, people increasingly imagine that they can control nature. But what about human nature? Until it smacks them in the face, they ignore their irrational, atavistic drives. No matter how well we talk the talk of technological mastery and rationality, there are crazy parts of us that remain beyond the reach of language to explain or resolve. Swedish with English subtitles.

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Variety

Monday, January 12 at 7:30 pm

"Citizenfour plays like a thriller as it chronicles a complex and vitally important chapter in our history.

Claudia Puig, USA Today

Monday, January 26 at 7:30 pm



"An ice cold knock out. Brilliantly perceptive and frostily funny."

Aaron Hills, Village Voice

Monday, February 9 at 7:30 pm